



Obama Tries to Set a Bipartisan Tone in Trip to Meet With Hill Republicans

By Edward Epstein and Kathleen Hunter

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When President Obama motors up to the Capitol on Tuesday for back-to-back sessions with House and Senate Republicans, he will be searching for support for his stimulus plan and trying to foster a spirit of openness that might come in handy for future legislative battles.

Congressional historians say the new Democratic president's trip to Congress to speak to the opposing party's members might be historic. "A formal address by the president of the United States to the opposing party's respective caucus or conference on Capitol Hill is unusual," said Anthony Wallis, a researcher with the Office of the House Historian.

Presidents have journeyed to the Capitol to meet with members from their own party and have traveled to the other party's annual policy conferences. President George W. Bush, for instance, flew to Williamsburg, Va., in early 2007 to address House Democrats after they took control of the House the previous November. But the feelings of bipartisan cooperation engendered by Bush's visit soon disappeared. And early in his first term, President Ronald Reagan met with senators of both parties in the President's Room just off the Senate floor, when Republicans were in the majority in the upper chamber.

But Obama made reaching out to Republicans a key part of his 2008 candidacy, and experts say Tuesday's rare midday sessions appear to reflect an interest in bridging the partisan gap.

"When you are president and you go up to Capitol Hill, it's a win-win situation," said Stephen Farnsworth, a professor of political communications at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. "You increase media attention and you lay down a marker to the opposition that there is a high price to pay for opposing you."

"I think he's trying to set a different tone and maybe pick up votes" for the stimulus package of more than \$800 billion, said Ronald Peters, a congressional scholar at the University of Oklahoma. Top GOP leaders in the House and Senate have so far slammed the package for being short on tax cuts while adding hundreds of billions of dollars in spending that they say won't quickly create jobs.

But even if big majorities of Republicans oppose the stimulus, the president must still look ahead. “He’s got other fish to fry, on such things as health care and Social Security reform, and wants to build on this,” Peters said. “If he has to rely on Democrats alone to pass things, he can. But he’d rather not.”

In the House, where Democrats hold a majority of 255 seats to the Republicans’ 178, the stimulus (HR 1) is expected to pass easily on Wednesday. In the Senate, where Republicans hold 41 seats — one more than the number a united GOP caucus would need to mount a filibuster — the president has less room to maneuver. The Senate version of the stimulus could come to the Senate floor within a few days.

Already in the 111th Congress, House Republicans have shown they aren’t monolithic. On Jan. 14, when the House voted to expand the children’s health insurance program (HR 2) by a vote of 289-139, 40 Republicans joined 249 Democrats in support. Several House aides suggest that those 40 Republicans form the core of potential GOP support that the president is courting by visiting that party’s House conference.

House Republican leaders sent Obama a letter last week requesting the meeting. The top House and Senate GOP leaders, joined by their Democratic counterparts, met with Obama on Jan. 23 in the White House and were able to present some of their ideas to him. News accounts afterward said Obama didn’t knock down their tax cut ideas but did remind them that his ideas for boosting the economy had prevailed in the Nov. 4 election and that tax cuts make up a large share of the package he has unveiled.

But White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said Monday that Obama is still serious about considering GOP ideas.

“I think there is a very deliberative process whereby these ideas will be certainly discussed with the president” before some are debated and voted upon, Gibbs said.

Farnsworth said Obama is appealing to a much wider audience than just Congress. “The real importance of this appearance is trying to convince the public that he is trying to meet the Republicans halfway and govern in a more bipartisan way,” he said.

He forecast that Obama will be more successful in picking up votes in the Senate than in the House. “There is a much more competitive electoral environment in the Senate,” he said. He predicted that GOP senators from hard-pressed industrial states — such as Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and George V. Voinovich of Ohio — will be reluctant to vote against a stimulus package. Although Voinovich is not running for re-election in 2010, his voting against the bill could endanger the GOP’s chances of retaining his seat.

But Specter says he wants answers first.

“I intend to ask him about what specifics the administration has developed on the package which will produce jobs,” Specter said. “And then I also intend to tell him — this is not his province — but that I would hope that the Senate would follow regular

order, that is, to have hearings and a markup and floor debate and amendments. We did not do that on the bailout package, and it was a mistake.”

Specter added that the extent to which Obama can assure him on those two fronts would influence his vote. “If you have a calculation that the programs are designed to produce jobs as promptly as possible and you go through regular order, that’s pretty much the ballgame,” he said.

Voinovich said Republicans have had little opportunity to review the stimulus proposal and urged Obama to tell GOP senators that he would delay action on it until Republican senators had a chance to look at the plan more thoroughly and to suggest changes.

“That’s the kind of thing I would have done as governor or mayor of Cleveland,” said Voinovich. “That would help a great deal in order to start out on the right foot with the Senate.”

But Obama’s overtures, while appreciated, are being met with skepticism from many Senate Republicans.

“The way that he could change Republican minds would be to demonstrate that he is willing to accept some of our ideas,” said Minority Whip John Kyl, R-Ariz. “He has been willing to hear our ideas, but that hasn’t yet translated into changes in the program.”

Kyl said he and other Senate leaders had already had an opportunity to speak with Obama at the White House but that Tuesday’s meeting would be an opportunity for rank-and-file GOP senators to share “some thoughts or questions” with the new president.

While Sen Lisa Murkowski , R-Alaska, said Obama’s visit “is the kind of reach-out that any president should do” on an issue as important as the stimulus, she added that Obama’s comments were unlikely to sway her.

“I can’t imagine that there’s anything right now that he would say that would tip me over the edge one way or another,” Murkowski said.

Despite such skepticism, Democratic senators have confidence in Obama’s ability to score points with their colleagues on the other side of the aisle and win votes for the stimulus.

“I think most of them want to feel like they’re part of it,” said Sen. Christopher J. Dodd , D-Conn. “I think that’s very important. I think the president has great skills in that regard. I think he believes it.”